

## **“Now’s The Time”: Improvisation-based Pedagogies and the Creation of Coevalness**

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**Abstract** *The term “performance” used to describe learning outcomes in educational settings has little of the richness ascribed by anthropologists. This paper adopts a dynamic sense of performance as shared time, theorized by Johannes Fabian as coevalness and Victor Turner as communitas, to problematize student engagement with pre-structured curricular materials. It contrasts it with alternative participatory frameworks utilizing improvisation. I describe core features of jazz interaction to illustrate how collaborative, context-dependent processes that constitute improvisation may be synthesized into a pedagogical approach; one that enhances student communicative abilities, fosters critical thinking and negotiation skills, and promotes engagement by cultivating temporal awareness. I present Dorothy Heathcote’s “Mantle of the Expert” and “Process Drama” as curricular approaches that employ improvisation and I reflect on how the pedagogical ends they achieve are consonant with the aims of critical pedagogy.*

**Keywords** anthropology, coevalness, communitas, education, improvisation

### **Introduction**

The term “performance” used to describe learning outcomes in educational settings has little of the richness ascribed by anthropologists. This paper adopts a dynamic sense of performance as articulated by Turner (1979), Fabian (1983, 1990), Conquergood (1989, 1991, 1992) and Pineau (1994) to problematize student engagement with pre-structured curricular materials and contrast it with alternative participatory frameworks that utilize improvisation. Using jazz as a model, I present improvisation as a framework that enhances student communicative proficiencies, fosters critical thinking and negotiation skills, and promotes student engagement. Improvisation embraces life’s inherent indeterminacy and frees participants to creatively explore divergent paths to understanding.

I begin this paper by discussing how an understanding of cultural change in improvisational terms entails a re-conceptualization of cultural acts and artifacts,

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and how such a view reframes the creation and consumption of cultural products as an ongoing interpretative process. These anthropological perspectives have been clearly articulated by Mary Catherine Bateson (1990, 1994) and Tim Ingold (1986, 2007). I then integrate these perspectives with the works of Walter J. Ong (2000) and Johannes Fabian (1983, 1990) to problematize cultural difference in ways that enrich a theoretical base for improvisation in the classroom. I begin by presenting Ong’s characterization of oral and literal cultures as a means to explore alternative forms of engagement.

Here I emphasize the skills and social orientation of members in oral cultures as a ground for the dialogic immediacy of improvisational forms explained later. Next I look at Fabian’s understanding of coevalness, or shared time, and the ways in which anthropological practices (and, by extension, many forms of curricular implementation) alienate the participants they purportedly seek to represent. This leads to a discussion of cultural participation as performance, a theoretical move that has been termed the “performative turn.”

I turn to Victor Turner’s notion of *communitas* (1979) to explore the performative nature of ritual and the ways in which it supports identity formation and bonds of affiliation. This may take the form of dissensus, a shared forum for the exploration of transgressive ideas. The notion of performance plays a central role in critical approaches in arts-based curricula, and is of particular importance in a jazz-based praxis.

I conclude by demonstrating how improvisation, as realized in Heathcote’s “Mantle of the Expert” and “Process Drama,” acts as a generative context for student interaction in which these practices are enacted. These approaches are important models of classroom participation consonant with the dialogic interaction espoused by Aronowitz & Giroux in their articulation of critical pedagogy (1985).

## **The Ongoing Creation of Culture**

*[H]umans do not, through their creative inventions, transform the world from without, but rather – belonging within it – play their part in the world’s creative transformation of itself. (Ingold, 2007, p. 53, italics all in original)*

If, as Pineau (1994) holds, there is a “heuristic value of performance as both an explanatory metaphor and a pedagogical method for educational phenomena” (p. 8), it may be found in the improvisational enactment of lived subjectivities in the classroom.

Edward Bruner’s claim (Bruner, 1993, p. 322) that “Improvisation is a cultural imperative” has been taken up in recent anthropological literature which considers improvisation as a theme. Recognizing that culture is both the reproduction of

beliefs and practices, as well as the transformative performance of those structures, anthropologists have turned to improvisation as a model for cultural change. One such text, *Creativity and cultural improvisation*, edited by Elizabeth Hallam and Tim Ingold (2007), collects perspectives on tensions and opportunities involved in cultural adaptation and change. Ingold sums up the role of a socially embedded agent in dynamic terms comparable to that of a student:

Far from being a strategic planner, aloof from the material world upon which its designs are inscribed, the mind is in practice a hotbed of tactical and relational improvisation. As it mingles with the world, the mind's creativity is inseparable from that of the total matrix of relations in which it is embedded and into which it extends, and whose unfolding is constitutive of the process of social life. (Ingold & Hallam, 2007, p. 9)

Schools that disregard the relational context of student learning are therefore unable to impart knowledge, only information. Learning as presented in curricula that eschew the negotiation of knowledge comes at a heavy price, as the absence of dialogue serves to reinforce power imbalances. These dynamics have been explored by Paolo Freire (1993).

While conservative forces in cultures seek to reproduce and perpetuate given structures (often, it may be noted, to maintain power asymmetries), cultures are slowly transformed due to the complexity of relations and practices. Ingold uses an apt musical metaphor: “No repeating system in the living world can be perfect, and it is precisely because imperfections in the system call for continual correction that all repetition involves improvisation. That is why life is rhythmic rather than metronomic” (Ingold, 2007, p. 11). Life is an emerging experience of variation and diversity. When cultural agents demand exact replication, they fail to recognize the implications this has for the vitality and viability of tolerance within their society.

Anthropologist Mary Catherine Bateson (1990, 1994) believes these concerns may be addressed by re-framing learning, especially as it occurs outside settings considered educational. An awareness of the improvisational nature of cultural change is not simply a matter of artistic appreciation, but a mark of cultural viability and vitality. Improvisation and imagination are necessary for coping with the indeterminacy of environmental change. She writes: “The rise of fundamentalism within any tradition is always a symptom of the unwillingness to try to sustain joint performances across disparate codes—or to put it differently, to live in ambiguity, a life that requires constant learning” (1994, p. 13). Education should help learners become more aware of ways to confront change in order to encourage versatility; learners are “strengthened to meet uncertainty if they claim a history of improvisation and a habit of reflection” (ibid, p. 6).

Echoing her father’s interests in play, Bateson concludes that “living and learning are everywhere to be found on an improvisational base” (ibid, p. 9). Her description of the generative and aesthetic dynamics of cultural creativity could equally well apply to the classroom learning I present here: “Life as improvisatory art, [is] about the ways we combine familiar and unfamiliar components in response to new situations, following an underlying grammar and an evolving aesthetic” (Bateson, 1990, p. 3).

This perspective entails an active, self-conscious use of the imagination, one that distinguishes cultural reproduction from creative cultural responses that generate multiplicity, indeterminacy and ambiguity. As Hastrup (2007) notes: “imagination... provides the link between action and history... [it] also makes the creative agent perceive that intention and consequence are not one and the same” (in Ingold & Hallam, 2007, p. 204). This increased experience of agency is one facet of improvisatory practice with obvious benefits for learners.

The flux of lived cultures, in and through which participants continually redefine and recreate themselves, is at odds with static descriptions, especially those imposed from without. Anthropologists grapple with adequate forms of representation for the Other. In the early part of the 20th century, Malinowski’s Ethnographer aimed to represent the “natives” own points of view, but analyzed their culture in terms that only the outsider was privy to; beyond the own participant’s ken:

The integration of all the details observed, the achievement of a sociological synthesis of all the various, relevant symptoms, is the task of the Ethnographer... the Ethnographer has to construct the picture of the big institution, very much as the physicist constructs his (*sic*) theory from the experimental data, which always have been within reach of everybody, but needed a consistent interpretation. (Malinowski, 2002, p. 64)

The role of the ethnographer and the objectivity of participant observation have since come into question. The study of such abstracted cultural “facts” have yielded to understandings of performative “acts.”

### **The “World-as-Presence”**

A key feature of collective improvisation is the shared experience of participants in the co-creation of a work. Below, I highlight the implications that notions of shared time and presence have for context-specific forms of learning.

The dynamic aspects of cultural creation and the fixity of language co-exist in a state of tension, one that renders the representation of these creative and emergent dynamics complex. One area where representation has been problematic is in the

encounter between oral cultures and literary cultures. Walter J. Ong, who traces the perceptual and cognitive structures of peoples in non-literate cultures in his remarkable book *Orality and literacy* (2000), has most carefully explored these ideas. True oral cultures do not have a system of writing; as a result, their means of transmitting culture are in many ways diametrically opposite to the forms adopted by literary cultures.

Ong has shown, however, that this marks only the most obvious of differences. His analysis probes deeper into cognitive processing and the resultant shapes language takes in these different settings. Of relevance to the present discussion is his characterization of sound—its transience and the ramifications this has for cultural exchange and collaboration.

For preliterate cultures, language has power, as does all sound, which signifies a presence. In *World as view and world as event*, Ong (1969) argues that “the dynamism inherent in all sound tends to be assimilated to the dynamism of the human being, an unpredictable and potentially dangerous dynamism because a human being is a free, unpredictable agent” (p. 638). He contrasts this way of being in the world with the disembodied capacities of written language, noting that a visual bias is deeply embedded metaphorically into our modern modes of thought. On the worldview of the preliterate peoples, he writes:

Their “world” is not so markedly something spread out before the eyes as a “view” but rather something dynamic and relatively unpredictable, an event-world rather than an object-world, highly personal, overtly polemic, fostering sound-oriented, traditionalist structures less interiorized and solipsistic than those of technologized man. (Ong, 1969, p. 634)

Ong suggests we question the degree to which our preponderance of visually based conceptions pre-empts perceiving the world differently. He argues that the cognitive skills concomitant with literacy have rendered the aural world as experienced by preliterate cultures incomprehensible, and that we are further limiting our experience by relying so heavily upon a single sense.

Ong seeks “to move from the concept of world sense to the concept of world-as-presence” (Ong, 1969, p. 646). In espousing the adoption of improvisational activities in the classroom, I am also placing a strong emphasis on verbal dialogue and negotiation. These forms of engagement, and the concomitant practice of oral skills, may in part redress an imbalance perpetuated in schools, a visual bias marked by the shift from orality to literacy. Improvisation foregrounds presence and embodied thought in contrast to disembodied and decontextualized scripts.

Western society does not easily fall into either category of the oral/literate dichotomy. The growing predominance of oral forms in arts, such as signifying in hip-hop culture and those made possible by multi-media in the form of podcasts,

has resulted in what Tricia Rose (1994) has termed “post-literate orality,” or what Daniel Belgrad (1998, p. 193) calls “secondary orality.” This “possibility of asserting the values of an oral culture within a culture already conditioned by writing” (Borgo, 2002, p. 179) offers new means of expressive and communicative forms of encounter that help to create a common, dialogic “now” for participants.

### **Coevalness as Shared Time**

Much anthropological analysis has implied a master script of cultural development, one that further alienates agents from those who view them as objects of study. Ethnographers have, by considering cultures in developmental terms, removed them from their own lived time in favour of an abstracted notion of progress, one that, not surprisingly posits Western culture as the most advanced, as these views supported their own cultural standing.

This assumption, writes Johannes Fabian in his groundbreaking text *Time and the Other* (1983), has gone unquestioned since anthropology was recognized as a discipline, and was given greater explanatory force by Darwin’s work (note Ong’s use of the term “pre-literate”). An alternative understanding Fabian discusses is “coevalness,” which connotes “a common, active ‘occupation,’ or sharing, of time” (p. 31).

This is to be understood in a dynamic performative sense. Simultaneity, especially in reflexive ethnography, cannot be assumed, because “for human communication to occur, coevalness has to be created. Communication is ultimately about shared Time” (ibid, pp. 30-31). Anthropology, however, more commonly reflects a “denial of coevalness... a persistent and systematic tendency to place the referent(s) of anthropology in Time other than the present of the producer of anthropological discourse” (ibid, p. 31).

This distancing effect provides an analogy for the temporal disparity caused by the use of pre-scripted materials in curricula—the determination of textual materials prior to any encounter with learners and resultant lockstep notion of progress—which is the chief means of transmitting and organizing school culture. Instead of denying coevalness, and perpetuating a learning culture in which students are distanced from both the texts and each others’ attempts to interpret these materials, the collaborative, context-dependent process that constitutes improvisation frames participants acting as co-creators, and may foster engagement in which top-down, hegemonic class dynamics are minimized.

Despite their differing perspectives on evolution, Fabian’s work in anthropology has much of the same flavour as Henri Bergson’s (2005) work in philosophy. Bergson discussed the way in which spatial understandings obstruct a direct apprehension of pure time, which he called the *durée*. According to Bergson, the *durée* is only comprehensible via the intuition. Both Fabian and Bergson are sensitive to the constant (one is inclined to say omnipresent) influence of time as a

feature shaping our perceptions and discourses. Indeed, one way of considering coevalness may be as shared *dureé*, the co-creation of a common time frame in which true dialogue is embedded.

There is, then, a practical limit to which dynamic flux can be captured in language, adequately expressed as a lexicon of static descriptors or operationalized as a series rules. While analyses necessarily make use of more or less invariable terms for representing change, we must recognize their inability to capture the contingent aspects of enactive performance. Ingold and Hallam confront this elusiveness directly, stating, “Our claim is not just that life is unscripted, but more fundamentally, that it is unscriptable. Or to put it another way, it cannot be fully codified as the output of any system of rules and representations” (Ingold & Hallam, 2007, p. 12). We improvise.

I turn now to the qualities of performance in pedagogies that utilize improvisation. The shared sense of time fostered creates a common ground that promotes and nurtures democratic participation.

## Performance

*If in poststructuralist thought “performance” mounts a challenge to the hegemony of “text,” then improvised performance represents the epitome of that capacity. (Frost & Yarrow, 2007, p. 194, italics added)*

“Performance” is a term that moves across a number of fields, and is considered of vital significance in each of the areas where it has been adopted: in the arts it is closely allied to the representation of piece and artist; in business it connotes ability, effectiveness; in education, it betokens student achievement and potential for development. In common parlance, performance defines a key feature of a product—how a car performs on the road. The divergent uses of the term have led theorists to question the applicability of the concept of performance in different disciplines.

According to Dwight Conquergood (1989), the performative turn impacts upon our epistemology in a more basic sense, as “a counterpoint to logical positivism” (Conquergood, 1989, p. 83), a positivism embodied in fixed concepts and artifacts. Crease (1994) speaks of the bias inherent in such a positivistic view, one that echoes Ong’s distinctions between oral and literate cultures:

According to an ancient philosophical tradition, the origin of meaning lies in obedience to order, rules, intelligibility, categories. In the grip of this deep seated ontological prejudice, we are led away from the primacy of performance to value the text, representation, notation over performance,

and the actual performance can appear to be incidental and ornamental to the work itself; one may speak of the “apparent superfluity of performance.” (Crease, 1994, p. 183-184)

Victor Turner’s work on ritual has been seen as a pivotal move that initiated a shift in anthropology towards the analysis of performative aspects. The notion of the individual creatively negotiating cultural change underlies Turner’s concept of humankind as “homo performans, humanity as performer, a culture-inventing, social-performing, self-making and self-transforming creature” (Conquergood, 1991, p. 187). Turner saw collective performance as a means by which “a group or community seeks to portray, understand, and then act on itself. Essentially, public reflexivity takes the form of a performance” (Turner, 1979, p. 465). In *The Anthropology of Performance* (1979), Turner describes this form of group reflection and engagement as “normative *communitas*,” in which “individuals come together and devise rules for themselves” (ibid, p. 44).

Edith Turner (2004), Turner’s wife and colleague, defines *communitas* as “a relational quality of full, unmediated communication, even communion, between people of definite and determinate identity, which arises spontaneously in all kinds of groups, situations, and circumstances” (ibid, p. 97). The dynamics that characterize *communitas* she offers in the following description could equally well apply to improvisation:

*Communitas liberates individuals from conformity to general norms. It is the fount and origin of the gift of togetherness, and thus of the gifts of organization, and therefore of all structures of social behaviour, and at the same time it is the critique of structure that is overly law-bound. (ibid, p. 98)*

As with *communitas*, the collaborative nature of improvisation “does not involve a withdrawal from multiplicity but eliminates divisiveness and realizes nonduality. *Communitas* strains toward universalism and openness” (Turner, 2004, p. 98). This view emphasizes relation and dialogue, or the insider perspectives one gains by being a co-participant. Coevalness may be regarded as a dynamic instantiation of *communitas*, a shared time that acts as a generative fount from which a sense of connectedness and affiliation springs.

It must be noted here that improvisation is not collaboration that is necessarily free of conflict. Turner’s notion of *communitas* does not easily account for forms of dissent that may underlie interaction in collective improvisation. Indeed, the active critical stance required of participants in the dialogic process involves negotiation common to other forms of democratic action. As such, group improvisation is not only about problem solving, but may be seen as a vehicle for probing the limits of

accepted conventions and negotiating the subjective criteria each player brings as well. Improvisational contexts may also promote dissensus, acting as a co-created space in which players “agree to disagree.”

In an effort to move beyond assumed limitations of conventional tonalities, structures, and techniques, players may provoke one another to respond to radically dissonant interpretations of the material, offerings that explore the nature of the interaction itself. Thomson notes that “improvisation can serve to question—the fixity of evaluative criteria and authority that pervades ‘mastery/exclusion’ pedagogical models” (Thomson, 2007, p. 6). Rather than yield to the imposition of normative standards by an external authority, the specifics of each encounter are “contingent on the recognition of differences that defy objective, instrumentalist methods of reconciliation” (Thomson, 2007, p. 7).

The performative turn signals a shift from analytic frameworks that sever objectified facts from the fluid contexts that give them their meaning: “From structure, stasis, and stable pattern, ethnographers have turned their attention towards dynamic process, change, contingency, improvisation, performance, and struggle” (Conquergood, 1992, p. 83). Such generative, constructive views of performance reflect “the decentering lessons of ethnography” (ibid, p. 81), resulting in what Clifford Geertz describes as “the decline of faith in brute fact, set procedures, and unsituated knowledge” (Geertz, 1988, p. 131).

Performance as an interpretive frame reaffirms the co-creation of social encounters, and alters the method of the anthropologist, which may now be seen as an effort “to do ethnography with, not of” (Fabian, 1990, p. 43). Theorizing encounters as joint performance may act as a corrective to alternative theories that implicitly support the objectification and colonization of participants.

Improvisation is an explanatory frame for understanding the indeterminate unfolding of individual and cultural identities. Links between anthropology and improvisation have been critically compared by, somewhat surprisingly, organization science theorists. In *Is Ethnography Jazz?* (2003), Humphreys, Brown, and Hatch discuss ethnographers’ engagement as “a dual quest for self-identity and empathy that is improvised in ways resembling the musical ‘conversation’ between performing jazz musicians” (p. 5).

Jazz improvisation offers insight into the way in which the use of a language is a means to creating an identity, of entering and contributing to a tradition. Improvisation offers a means of understanding the construction and representation of identity in cultural studies, in which explorations of the interpretive role of the ethnographer may reveal less obvious facets to multiculturalism. Humphreys, et al. (2003) speak of the fundamental importance of understanding ethnographic work as “a series of performance-conversations in which the identity of the ethnographer and the *other* are improvisationally co-authored via conversation” (p. 16, italics in original), a view in harmony with Fabian’s notion of coevalness.

These theorists note that, while an improvisation-based perspective offers unique learning opportunities, the evaluation of such process is complex. Assessment criteria must also be flexible, for “ephemerality implies that what is to be considered plausible, coherent, or realistic is relative and will change with developments in the field or with changes in, or of, those who are engaged in the process” (Humphreys, et al., 2003, p. 18). In social encounters, qualitative evaluations may be based upon the ways in which those engaged are positively affected. This argument regards musical performances in terms of their ritual effectiveness.

Chris Small (1995), drawing upon the work of Charles Keil, argues that music should not be judged in isolation of the context in which it is performed. As performances, they signify an expressive pact between performer and listener, a form of fluid, interaction that is better considered as a verb (“musiking”) than as a noun (Small, 1995). He offers criteria for evaluating performances that diverge from the forms of evaluation adopted in schools, in that they are essentially qualitative and social in nature: “Any performance should be judged on its success in affirming, exploring and celebrating those relationships which those taking part feel to be ideal” (Small, 1995, p. n/a).

This approach implies a very different understanding of creativity as well, locating much of the dynamism in group interaction and the quality of participatory response. Instead of seeing music as a collection of cultural products, Small sees it as a dynamic site for *communitas*: “all musical events must ultimately be judged on their ritual efficacy, on the subtlety and comprehensiveness with which they empower those taking part to affirm, to explore and to celebrate their concepts of relationships” (1995).

Jazz interaction is this celebration, a reflective, ongoing critique that offers a means of both communal and self-representation. Jazz uses minimally defined musical forms as vehicles for personal expression, thereby allowing players to explore the contextual specificities (individual characters of the individuals in the ensemble, venue, occasion, interplay with audience, etc.) of the performance.

Improvisation in jazz involves a level of engagement in which previously learned patterns are re-contextualized, or even disregarded, in performance, so that players are set free to explore. Time is shared on the larger stage as well. Jazz performance also widens the dialogue to encompass the audience, as interaction between players is informed by the context and dynamics specific to its enactment. In jazz, players respond to one another’s work as the collective piece unfolds, collaboratively shaping the end products in ways that differ significantly from other less dialogic forms of interaction, which may be distorted by hierarchically structured uses of time.

In these systems, decisions made earlier on (such as the selection of a textbook) are removed from the feedback process. As such they may no longer be

questioned directly and come to constitute the ideological basis of the system. This marginalizes and dis-empowers those who are temporally distanced from the production of knowledge, depriving them of a voice.

To sum up: the standardizing agenda of “school culture” parallels biases in outmoded, Social Darwinist understandings in anthropology. Reproductive, pre-scripted forms of curricula alienate learners from the dynamic construction of knowledge and reframe learning as consumption. Such curricula forego the immediacy of learning encounters, and impart knowledge as a set of rules to be implemented rather than lived. The features of collective improvisation discussed above seldom receive much attention in the framing of pedagogical goals or student “progress.”

Improvisation understood in this light may help re-conceptualize learning environments as contexts that “[wed] aesthetics with ethics and politics by positing the human relationships” as the primary site of negotiation (Thomson, 2007, p. 4).

### **Performance pedagogy**

Art, as a form of expression common to all cultures, presents another means of ongoing revelation, in which new possibilities of the medium, the culture, and the artist are continually revealed. This sense of self-discovery pervades many forms of art, rendering them not as individuated products as much as fluid performances. Ingold (1986) says of the ritual magic designs of Tamil Nadu called *kampi kolam*, that it “embodies the process of thinking rather than detached thought, a consciousness rather than a conception, life itself rather than a way of living” (p. 182).

This perspective on art is well represented in Charles Garoian’s (1999) work on performance pedagogy, which brings out the educational, aesthetic, and political dimensions of work grounded in this understanding:

Contrary to pedagogies that distinguish and establish subjectivity in a dominant ethnocentric position, performance art pedagogy resists cultural conformity and domination by creating discourses and practices that are multicentric, participatory, indeterminate, interdisciplinary, reflexive, and intercultural. In doing so, performance art pedagogy is the praxis of postmodern theory. (Garoian, 1999, p. 10)

My discussion of improvisation springs from this assumption, namely that indeterminacy is a necessary condition for creativity. Cultures do not simply reproduce the forms that are granted ritual power; they participate in them in novel ways that shape the ritual according to specific contingencies and idiosyncrasies presented by the immediate context in which they are enacted.

As institutions that are inseparable from the culture in which they are embedded, these dynamics hold in educational settings as well.

### **Improvisation-based Pedagogies**

Not all education adheres to the dominant reproductive paradigm we currently face, one that invests the textbook industry with the authority to determine both the curricular materials and associated assessments. Improvisation, as a structuring context for pedagogy, has moved from an activity for teaching drama and jazz to other content areas. One such approach is Dorothy Heathcote’s “Mantle of the Expert” (Johnson & O’Neill, 2001), a pedagogical application of drama improvisation that has much in common with Lave and Wenger’s notion of situated practice.

Each posits the dynamic construction of knowledge in an emergent learning context that foregrounds social relationships. In *Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation* (1991), Lave and Wenger state, “Learning itself is an improvised practice: a learning curriculum unfolds in opportunities for engagement in practice. It is not specified as a set of dictates for proper practice” (p. 93). Lave and Wenger’s focus is on the distinct learning opportunities afforded by apprenticeships, which allow learners to develop their understandings and hone their skills alongside actual practitioners. This frame for learning directly parallels the relationship between learners and the teacher-in-role discussed below.

Dorothy Heathcote began formulating Mantle of the Expert at Newcastle-on-Tyne, England, in the early 1970s. The precepts in Mantle of the Expert were adopted and elaborated in an approach by Johnson and O’Neill (2001) under the name “Process Drama.” These approaches use loosely structured role-play to focus upon the enactment and discovery of knowledge. They utilize “pre-texts” to focus critical thinking and prompt student response. Both of these approaches use improvised drama to explore conflicts that arise in the enactment of multiple perspectives.

Learners are provoked to articulate their positions within imagined scenarios in an environment that grows out of purposeful interaction. Kao and O’Neill (1998) discuss the use of Process Drama in second language learning to promote strategic fluency and note that “[the students’] attention is shifted from language as an artefact to be mastered to a communicative goal to be reached” (p. 10).

Perhaps the most innovative feature of these approaches is the co-creative function the teacher plays. Acting as a “teacher in role” allows the teacher to direct the flow of the drama from within, and shape it in ways that are more collaborative than the asymmetric discourse relations common to many forms of instruction. Mantle of the Expert and Process Drama help to minimize the alienating factors mentioned earlier, by strengthening relational bonds between the learner and the

emergent material, with the other participants in the class, and with the teacher as well.

The learning that occurs through these pedagogies is an exploratory process that cannot be pre-scripted. It is learning that grows out of the complexity of interaction, of contact, one that involves “discovering by trial, error and testing; using available materials with respect for their nature, and being guided by this appreciation of their potential. The ‘end-product’ of improvisation is the experience of it” (Johnson & O’Neill, 2001, p. 44, italics in original). This experience, I believe, is a vital component of learning that needs to be made a constitutive element in the framing of curricula and design.

### **Conclusion**

This paper has problematized whether curricula can adequately reflect the processual nature of human becoming. I have tried to show how anthropological perspectives may inform these concerns, particularly as they have found expression in notions of performance and shared time.

The works discussed above by Fabian and Ong both caution against the distancing effects of anthropological scholarship that does not account for different orientations to time. Fabian’s work focuses upon the colonizing effects of Western ethnographical stances that assume a common, unitary view of time, as these forms of ethnography situate objectified cultures in an evolutionary narrative alien to their native ways of understanding. Such insufficiently sensitive attempts to represent native cultures reify these peoples as Other.

Ong’s work approaches this problem from a different perspective, by contrasting the means for understanding the world in oral cultures with those in literate cultures. Literate cultures make use of ways of representing knowledge and storing information unavailable to oral cultures, but these gains occlude other forms of understanding. I have argued that the prioritizing of literacy and pre-scripting of curricular materials in schools distances learners from social and cognitive benefits of oral communication.

These perspectives support the claim that schooling overemphasizes literacy without the complementary engagement afforded by oral interaction, reflection and disputation. An improvisation-based approach, I argue, would help redress this imbalance. I have emphasized the importance of the performative turn in anthropology, which provides an expanded understanding of performance, one that reconceptualizes cultural activities previously considered as the creation of products in terms of the social significance of their performative elements. This is an emergent, processual view of culture that sees change resulting from the socially embedded performance of agency.

Tim Ingold’s claim (2007) that improvisation is a fundamental activity in cultural transformation offers a useful and comprehensible frame for

reconceptualizing education, as it is in the school, as a socially constructed institution, where these perspectives on improvisation are likely to have greatest impact. This anthropological perspective foregrounds the interconnectedness between individual minds and the world they collectively create.

The view of improvisation discussed above resonates well with the critical pedagogy espoused by Aronowitz and Giroux (1985). These authors question the political dimensions of curricular implementation, particularly the disenfranchisement implicit in what they term “management pedagogies,” pedagogies that “ignore questions regarding cultural specificity, teacher judgment, and how student experiences and histories relate to the learning process itself” (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1985, p. 29).

These pedagogies “make the imaginary into an instrument of the prevailing order” (ibid, p. 18-19). As contexts that promote the voicing of individual subjectivities, improvisation-based curricula act to offset the power imbalances in these dominating pedagogies, and serve to create more democratic forms of interaction, understood not as “a set of formal rules of participation, but the lived experience of empowerment for the vast majority” (ibid, p. xi).

I believe that improvisation-based curricula offer a context in which participants can more actively direct their own learning by allowing them greater freedom to shape the emergent discourse. These contexts validate student subjectivities by foregrounding the dialogic nature of learning, and offer students opportunities to negotiate collaboration in real time. In improvisation, process and product are conflated. This mode of exploration has potential for opening spaces in the classroom as well—the interplay that guides how curricular material unfolds is regarded as a constitutive element in what is considered as knowledge.

In this way, alterity is regarded as an implicit condition in the expression of both individuals and in the interpretation of cultures. Improvisation respects the co-creative element in these encounters. Curricula based upon these dynamics recognize the underlying indeterminacy of education and open the way for not only flashes of inspiration, but also the shared experiences of transformation. I am interested in how learning environments act as catalysts and foster such transformations. Improvisation-based curricula create a common time frame for participants to interact in. This does not necessitate consensus, but moves towards a form of encounter that limits the distancing effects of time as described above.

Such dynamics serve to democratize student interaction, especially if inclusion and turn taking (such as the leadership rotation prevalent in jazz soloing) is encouraged. The focus on present expression encourages students to explore subjective relevance and response instead of the reification of convergent answers common to environments that favour high-stakes testing.

I would like to close with a few questions that Pineau poses concerning performance. These probe issues that lie at the heart of critical pedagogy and apply equally well to the improvisation-based curricula I propose:

How does performance reproduce, legitimate, uphold or challenge, critique or subvert ideology? ... How are performances situated between forces of accommodation and resistance? How do they simultaneously reproduce and struggle against hegemony? What are the performative resources for interrupting master scripts? (Pineau, 1994, p. 19)

The political and educational dynamics of improvisation offer a possible means to interrupt such master scripts, and may thereby help foster communities grounded in more engaged and equitable learning.

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